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SUBJECT: BACKBITING, BICKERING, AND EATING THEIR YOUNG:
SYRIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS FALL PREY TO SARG'S
"DIVIDE AND CONQUER" TACTICS

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¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Throughout the last eight months, a flurry of newly created human rights organizations have entered the Syrian civil society stage. However, the activists running these organizations are not new to the scene; instead, they tend to hail from splinter groups of still-existing organizations, spun off due to ideological or personal differences. Yet starting a new organization is not enough to end these internecine conflicts; instead, activists often continue their feuds both privately and publicly. Despite these internal divisions the human rights field remains the most engaged, vibrant area of civil society in a country where human rights violations abound. Beneath this squabbling, and to some extent, encouraging it, lies the bedrock reality of intense SARG repression, surveillance, and manipulation by the security services of these vulnerable organizations. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) THE HUMAN RIGHTS LANDSCAPE IN SYRIA: While Syria's first human rights organization was founded in 1989, such organizations have actually only been able to operate since Bashar al-Assad's rise to power in 2000. However, none of these organizations have been officially recognized as nongovernmental organizations by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MOSAL), despite their attempts to register. Instead, all of the organizations operate in a legal gray zone; in a January interview, Asad himself acknowledged the existence of such groups: "they are not licensed, but the state does not ban them..." Within the last eight months, at least six new human rights advocacy organizations and research centers have been launched.

¶3. (C) Syrian human rights organizations and research centers include:

--HUMAN RIGHTS ASSOCIATION OF SYRIA (HRAS or HRASSY); (Jamia Huuq al-Ensaan fi Syria): founded by Sunni human rights lawyer Haithem al-Maleh and Alawite engineer Salim Kheirbek in July 2000; current President is Fayed Fawaz. While its membership is ideologically diverse (Fawaz is a former communist), Maleh's Islamist sympathies continue to influence the group's statements and activities. Its work focuses mainly on human rights case documentation, international press work, and some legal representation. HRAS's board of directors is probably the most democratic of the organizations, requiring board approval for the publication of any press statement on arrests (much to the

chagrin of fellow activists, who find HRAS too slow-moving, particularly in crackdown situations). HRAS often provides meeting space at Maleh's office for other civil society and opposition endeavors, most notably for the Damascus Declaration group (which Maleh signed). Maleh was recently sentenced to three and one-half months in prison for insulting the army and court officers, a sentence commuted to ten days in prison. He is considered to be the unacknowledged dean of the human rights activists in Syria, at least among diplomats and other objective observers.

--ARAB HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATION (AHRO): (al-Monazema Al-Arabiya li Huquq al-Ensaan fi Syria); formally founded in 2002; President is Mahmoud al-Iriyan, Vice-President is Rassem al-Attasi; pan-Arabist ideology; closely aligned with the Democratic Arab Socialist Union and its leader, Hassan Abdulazeem. Its former president, Mohammed Radoun, was imprisoned for seven months in 2005 after an appearance on al-Jazeera Television during which he called for reform in Syria. Another member, Nizar Rastanawi, who has been imprisoned since April 2005, is currently on trial at the Supreme State Security Court on charges related to his activism. Work focuses on legal representation and case documentation.

--CENTER FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND STUDIES: founded by prominent human rights lawyers and activists Anwar al-Bunni and Khalil Maatouk, it has served mainly as a vehicle for Bunni's independent human rights advocacy activities; it is unclear what impact Bunni's short-lived, European Community-funded Civil Society Training Center, which was closed by the SARG after 10 days of operation in March (ref A), will have on this organization. Bunni is currently detained by SARG authorities, facing charges related to both the DBD and the EC-Training Center.

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--NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SYRIA (NOHR): (al-Monazema al-Watania li Huquq al-Ensaan fi Syria); founded in March 2006 by former AHRO spokesman Ammar al-Qurrabi. Prominent board members include former Damascus Spring detainee and attorney Habib Issa. Work focuses on legal representation, case documentation, and international and regional work.

--SYRIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATION/SWASIAH (I)(aka SHRO): (al-Monazema al-Syria li Huquq al-Ansaan): Founded in September 2004; President: Mohanned al-Hassani, Spokesman: Bassam Ishak. The organization's leaders characterize it as a small, exclusive organization that includes members of prominent Damascene families as well as prominent writers and intellectuals, including Sadeq Jalal al-Azm and Tayyeb Tizini. According to Hassani, the group's goal is to serve as a neutral party between the SARG and the opposition. Its work focuses on case documentation, legal representation, and international NGO networking, particularly with Egyptian human rights organizations.

--SWASIAH (II): Former spokesman Abdulkarim al-Rihawi left SWASIAH (I) in October 2005, but claims that he is the rightful president of the organization and that he had dismissed all the other board members from the organization. He appears to be working on his own without new members. His work focuses on case documentation and press work.

--DAMASCUS CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS STUDIES (DCHRS): (Markaz Dimeshq li-Derasat Huquq al-Ansaan); founded in late 2005; a human rights research center that produces a bi-monthly journal featuring academic papers and commentaries on the relationship between human rights and other issues; does not currently practice advocacy work. The center's director is Radwan Zyadeh. Rezan Zeituneh, one of the few women active in the human rights arena in Syria, serves as his deputy. (NOTE: In addition to her DCHRS work, Zeituneh works independently in case documentation, legal

representation, and networking with international human rights organizations.)

--COMMITTEE FOR THE DEFENSE OF DEMOCRATIC LIBERTIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN SYRIA (CDF) (I): (Lajnah al-Defaa'a an al-Hurriyat al-Demokratiya wa Huqq al-Ansaan fi Syria); originally founded in 1989; founded by Aktham Naisse, a secular Alawite, who was jailed from 1991-1998 and reimprisoned in 2004 for five months. Naisse resigned as President of CDF in December 2005 but, according to local activists, later changed his mind and tried to restore himself as president. According to post contacts, this attempt failed, and it is commonly accepted among civil society activists that the CDF is currently led by Danial Sauud and Nidal Darwish (a DBD detainee).

--CDF (II)/CHAM CENTER FOR DEMOCRATIC STUDIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS/COMMITTEE FOR ARRESTEES' RIGHTS/PROGRAM FOR SUPPORTING VIOLENCE VICTIMS: Naisse continues to sign documents and publish statements in the name of CDF. He also started a conglomerate of organizations in late 2005/early 2006, working on a variety of issues ranging from prisoners' rights to human rights research.

--KURDISH ORGANIZATION FOR THE DEFENSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND PUBLIC FREEDOM IN SYRIA (DAD): (al-Monazema al-Kurdiya lil-Defaa'a an al-Huqq al-Ansaan wa al-Huriyat al-A'ama fi Syria): founded in 2005 and working on Kurdish issues; leadership structure is unclear, spokesman is Luqman Osso, who is also an Kurdish Azadi Party activist. Work focuses on case documentation and raising awareness of Kurdish human rights issues.

--KURDISH COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS: formally founded in March 2006, also focusing on Kurdish issues; President is lawyer Radef Moustafa, who is also a Kurdish Future Movement party activist.

--DAMASCUS CENTER FOR THEORETICAL AND CIVIL RIGHTS STUDIES: (Markaz Dimeshq lil-Dirasat al-Naziria wa al-Huqq al-Medaniya); based in Sweden. President: Nasser al-Ghazali.

¶4. (C) PROLIFERATION OF ORGANIZATIONS STEM FROM IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES, SECURITY CONCERNS: Since 2000, a variety of conflicts have led a number of activists to start their own organizations. Maleh's organization HRAS, for example, has begotten at least four other organizations. The AHRO

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originated as a splinter group from HRAS after the HRAS membership opted not to join a Cairo-based pan-Arab human rights network. Another major split occurred in 2003, when secular-oriented HRAS members like Bunni and Zeituneh opposed the HRAS's use of the term "martyr" to describe the deaths of Syrian foreign fighters killed in clashes with U.S. troops in Fallujah, Iraq. Zyadeh and Zeituneh later started DCHRS, and Bunni and Maatook also later launched their own office, but all four activists have maintained official membership in HRAS as a gesture of unity with the "original" Syrian human rights group.

¶5. (C) The most recent split is the creation of NOHR, which was based on Qurrabi's desire to depoliticize human rights issues and distance his human rights work from AHRO's pan-Arab, Nasserist stance. The split is considered to have been friendly by observers, with Qurrabi proudly describing the "professional split" to Poloff in early May, including press statements from both sides wishing the other organization well.

¶6. (C) CDF has also produced a number of new organizations, in addition to the current Sauud/Darwish and Naisse wings of CDF, based mainly on questions about SARG infiltration. SWASIAH is an offshoot of CDF that developed after a number of CDF members accused Naisse of collaborating with the SARG

during his 2004/05 trial in order to win bail and later, an acquittal.

¶7. (C) COOPERATION BEGINS AND ENDS IN THE COURTROOM: The one area where the organizations do successfully cooperate is in providing legal representation in court to civil society activists facing prosecution. Lawyers from the various organizations meet regularly to discuss case strategies and appear to have developed a real esprit d'corps in their interactions. At most major trials and hearings over the last year, including those of Kamal Labwani, Hassan Abdulazeem, Mohammed and Ali Abdullah, and the ten DBD detainees, at least one lawyer from SWASIAH (I), AHRO, HRAS, and later NOHR, participated as defense lawyers.

¶8. (C) COMMON ACCUSATIONS OF PERSONAL AMBITION, OVERPOLITICIZATION, AND IDEOLOGICAL FAVORITISM: Splitting into different organizations has not put a stop to the disagreements among the activists. Drawing from the example of the Damascus Declaration, which in October 2005 brought a variety of political parties and organizations together, many activists have privately acknowledged the need for unity since the start of 2006, particularly in the face of the SARG's ongoing crackdown. Nonetheless, activists regularly question the motivations of some of their brethren and their dedication to "pure" human rights work, accusing them of conducting advocacy only on behalf of accused prisoners with specific ideologies, spending more time condemning regional and international events than focusing on domestic human rights issues, or being too involved with opposition politics. Activists also regularly accuse each other of being more interested in achieving regional and international notoriety through media interviews and not focusing enough on in-country advocacy work. Younger activists have also criticized Western media and organizations for giving too much attention to "symbols" of the human rights community, like Maleh, and, to a lesser extent these days, Naisse, who they perceive as having become relatively inactive but who nonetheless have received a number of European human rights prizes.

¶9. (C) ALWAYS VIGOROUS SARG PRESSURE HAS INCREASED IN PAST MONTH: Beneath the internecine squabbling, much of it relatively petty, lies the bedrock reality of intense surveillance, repression, and manipulation by the SARG security services of these vulnerable organizations. Activists have faced vigorous efforts by SARG security services to divide the groups and roll back unifying achievements such as the Damascus Declaration and the Damascus-Beirut Declaration (DBD). To achieve the recent crescendo of internal divisions over the DBD, the security services imprisoned some signatories but not all, and floated competing declarations and pressured non-imprisoned activists to sign them or risk imprisonment themselves (ref B). The SARG then used the resulting fissures and recriminations to weaken the organizations further and undermine the legitimacy of the DBD.

¶10. (C) LONGSTANDING CONCERNS ABOUT SARG PENETRATION OF THEIR ORGANIZATIONS: While activists often hint at or even discuss some of their own meetings with security service

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representatives, they are even more willing to gossip about the purported SARG links of their fellow activists. As SARG manipulation and pressure on the organizations increased in the past month, so too has speculation among activists about who among them has succumbed to it. Both Naisse and Rihawi are the most common targets of speculation about having close ties to the SARG, with Rihawi's signing of a number of SARG-sponsored documents last week (ref B) confirming many activists' suspicions. Hassani is also a target of suspicion, particularly after he encouraged the ten DBD detainees on June 3 to sign a letter to Asad asking for their release, a suggestion the detainees rejected, viewing it as a SARG tactic designed to de-legitimize them and their

principled stand in support of the DBD (ref C). Some activists also remain suspicious of Qurrabi, noting that his up-to-the-minute scoops on arrests and trials are clearly sourced from the security services (rather than from detainee family members or lawyers).

¶11. (C) COMMENT: While divisions, recriminations, and suspicions abound among the alphabet soup of Syrian human rights organizations, these groups nonetheless undertake acts of relatively heroic activism and human rights advocacy. They have focused on, and have raised international awareness about, the dire violations of human rights in a country governed for forty years by Emergency Law, a tool allowing the government to act without restraint or respect for any articulated rights of its citizenry. Despite the splits and conflicts, the human rights field is the area where civil society in Syria is the most vibrant. While weak, divided, and full of ideological and personal bickering, it is as good as it gets here in civil society -- and as good as the government will allow it to get. END COMMENT.

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